

Washington, DC -- Today, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) along with Congressman Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) successfully passed two amendments to H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act, which will improve mental health care for our wounded soldiers.

“As someone who wore the cloth of the nation for 31 years, few things are as important to me as our obligation to support those who have fought for our country,” stated Joe. “That is why I will always do my utmost to ensure that our soldiers have the care and treatment they deserve.”

The first amendment highlights the fact that mental health care is an essential component to the medical services offered to our Veterans and the members of our Armed Services by clarifying that ‘medical care’ as discussed in H.R. 1538 includes mental health care services.

While we are all familiar with the images of soldiers who have returned home maimed as a result of an IED, it is another range of medical challenges that are increasingly being seen as the signature disability of the War in Iraq – mental health disorders and the invisible psychological trauma of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to a Pentagon study released last year, thirty-five percent of Iraq War veterans received mental health care during their first year home, while 12 percent were diagnosed with a mental health ailment.

“Left untreated, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can ultimately lead to other problems, including drug and alcohol abuse,” added Joe. “This is an issue that we simply cannot ignore, and my amendment brings a much-needed spotlight on the problem.”

The second amendment, also offered with Congressman Kennedy, requires the Secretary of the Department of Defense to develop a plan to help prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other stress-related psychopathologies (including substance abuse conditions) from developing in our military service members. In addition, it requires the Secretary to submit to Congress within 180 days a plan for establishing a Peer-Reviewed research program within the Defense Health Program’s research and development function to research the prevention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and how to best strengthen the psychological resiliency of our military service members.

“We can no longer afford to look at physical care and mental health care as two separate entities – with physical care as ‘legitimate’ and ‘mental health care’ as something less than that,” stated Joe. “Our amendments are common-sense legislation that brings equity to mental health care.”

Just last week, Congressman Sestak attended an event hosted by the Military Order of the Purple Heart for the VA Medical Center in Coatesville, PA, and spoke to a doctor there who works with and treats veterans with PTSD. He emphasized to Joe his concerns about the level of resources, attention, and the scope of care available to those who need mental health services. This is why, in addition to these two amendments, Joe also held a forum last month on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Equity in Delaware County with Representative Kennedy, where Representative Kennedy spoke of this and the importance of properly addressing the needs of veterans and service members. Congressman Sestak is also working on additional legislation addressing the funding of PTSD and quality reporting of medical care by DOD and the VA.

“We have fought to send our troops into battle with the best equipment and the best possible training. But we need to take further steps to better protect their minds and mental well-being against the shattering experience of war,” said Congressman Patrick Kennedy. “Both amendments will improve mental health care for our soldiers while insuring more research is conducted and more preventative steps are taken to guard against the development of mental health problems.”

The amendment clarifying the definition of medical care passed the House of Representatives unanimously by voice vote. The second amendment developing a plan to prevent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder also passed unanimously by a vote of 426 to 0. H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act, passed the House by bipartisan support by a vote of 426 to 0 and has since been referred to the Senate where it awaits further action.

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "DeepBlue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on*

*Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.*

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